B. Social Role

596 562 769 The principal social function of the family in China was the bearing, rearing, and training of children. Sons were more highly valued than daughters, becuase only the former remained with the family after marriage, contributing to its labor and income, and only sons could perpetuate the family and perform the yearly rites in honor of the father and the family ancestors after the father's death. Implicit in the ceremony was the idea that the ancestors had a life afte death, watched over the family's fortune, and were comforted by the periodic ministrations of the family. For the living, the rites provided an occasion for awe and respect during which the continuity of the family over time was reemphasized and the solidarity and duties of the family unit in the present reasserted.

The veneration of ancestors was so important to Chinese society that the absence of sons to carry on the yearly observances was regarded as a major failing on the responsible male's part and a tremendous catastrope for the family. Concubinage and adoption were socially and legally sanctioned as means of providingsons, if marriage produced only daughters or no children at all. Because of the necessity of providing against a high death rate, the premium on sons resulted in over-population, only partly offset by a high rate of female infanticide.

554 561 596 Just as sex, age, and generation determined an individual's status within the family, so did

561 554 596 these factors determine his behavior and position in the community and the world at large. An additional determinant of his standing was the status of his family in society.

562 554 Authority and dominance were the province of the males. Women might, and occasionally did, exervise overt leadership. More frequently, they were the power behind the throne. Such cases were exceptional, however. In modern times,at least, supremacy was neither desired by women nor readily admitted to when possessed.

561 554 Age was honored relatively and absolutely. Long life automatically gave its possessor higher standing in the community, but whatever age he attained, he was to show respect to his elders and members of an older generation. In the society of traditional China, age implied the accumulation of wisdom and experience vital to society in times of decision or crisis.

555 596 554 Individual status also improved with education, more particularly with the attainment of a degree in the official examinations and appointment to official position. An individual's educational or official careeer was usually dependent on the willingness and ability of the family to support him during a long period of study. A particularly promising youngster of a poor family might occasionally be underwritten by the clan or village. Whatever his means of financial support, his success in the exams was a reflection of proper upbringing and honored his family and, to a lesser extent, his clan and